



PM Koizumi's Visit to Yasukuni Shrine: Waste of Political Capital

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The annual question of whether to pay an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine on August 15 has plagued prime ministers and governments for several decades. This year, Prime Minister Koizumi visited Yasukuni Shrine on August 13 instead of 15 (anniversary of the war end) without calling it an "official" visit, in consideration of the heavy criticism from both inside and outside Japan.

There is no easy answer. Many conservative Japanese probably believe that it is only natural for a head of government to pay his respects to the souls of those who have given their lives in defense of their country. This practice is followed in many nations, including the United States. The Japanese, however, attach considerably more importance to observing periodic rituals following death than Americans do. The problem in the case of Yasukuni is that not only fallen heroes are enshrined there, but also the souls of a number of class-A war criminals, whose excesses during World War II most people—especially Japan's Asian neighbors—find barbaric and unforgivable.

Some point out that until the administration of Prime Minister Nakasone, prime ministers routinely visited Yasukuni after PM Miki's visit on August 15 in 1975. Before PM Miki, most prime ministers had visited Yasukuni on its seasonal ritual day in spring or autumn, since PM Yoshida's visit in 1951. While that may be true, and no one paid much attention, the war criminals were not officially enshrined until 1978, and it was not until 1985, when PM Nakasone visited Yasukuni "officially," that the visit became so controversial among Japan's neighbors. (Yasukuni visits had been controversial domestically between conservatives and liberals, particularly regarding the principle of the separation of church and state.)

Both the Chinese and the Koreans have been relentlessly critical of the prospective visit by Mr. Koizumi and appear unlikely to ease up. To complicate matters, this issue comes in the wake of the ongoing controversy over a new middle school textbook, which many Koreans and Chinese regard as an inaccurate portrayal of history. (In truth, many Japanese may be taking the same view because, so far, less than 1 percent of schools actually have decided to use the book.)

On the surface, it appears that an official visit to Yasukuni by the prime minister has placed an unnecessary and undesirable strain on relations with Japan's Asian neighbors. Korea has already suspended many exchanges, and more will probably follow. This seems especially unfortunate in the case of Korea, where President Kim Dae Jung has taken enormous political risks to improve relations with Japan, whose attempt may not be replicated for another generation.

Thus, the question arises as to whether the domestic political benefits that PM Koizumi might accrue from a Yasukuni visit will outweigh the national diplomatic costs. This is a question that only the prime minister can decide. To an outside observer, however, it appears that Japan has a great deal at stake—both economically and in national security terms—in maintaining relations of trust with its two closest neighbors. Japan needs a stable and friendly ROK government, and a vigorous economic and political relationship with China is of enormous long-term strategic importance to the whole region.

With his compromise visit to Yasukuni, PM Koizumi wasted the precious political capital that he had accumulated to that point. Conservative supporters and LDP members were disappointed with his visit because the PM did not visit "officially" on August 15. Critical liberal-minded coalition partner Komeito, and other liberal supporters, were disappointed with visit itself. Realists were disappointed with Koizumi's lack of strategic thinking vis-à-vis Asian security. PM Koizumi's unsteady handling of the Yasukuni visit may overshadow his primary mission, Japan's economic structural reform.

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